

Sunday August 20, 2023
Lesson 12: A Mother's Persistence
Scripture: Mark 7:24-30

Context:

Today we continue our summer curriculum, "Inspired By God." In this third lesson of our third and final unit, "Heroes and Anti-Heroes," we consider how God works through various people who do not fall into neat categories. The concept of heroes and anti-heroes invites us to consider questions of daily ethics and the circumstances which influence how people make decisions. We are also reminded of how God challenges us to grow in our faith as well as the faith of people we would not put in our circles. Today's hero (or heroine) is the Syrophenician woman found in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. The focus of today's lesson is to grasp how verbally wrestling with God can help us grow in our faith.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus moves from place to place. I encourage students and church members to always pay attention to names even if these ancient places mean nothing to us today. For the original context, these places would have meant something. Even though Jesus does most of his ministry in Galilee, a predominately Jewish setting, it is significant when we read of Jesus making side treks particularly to Tyre, a large Phoenician port city in modern day Syria.¹ The reader is alerted to how Jesus is in a place where Gentiles primarily live.

We are introduced to the Syrophenician woman, another term to mean she is a Gentile. Even though Jesus does not want anyone to know he is there, she somehow discovers the fact and comes to find him, falling at her feet. The woman pleads for Jesus to throw the demon out of her daughter, a normal plea one would expect a mother to make for her child.

What follows is one of the most curious and debated interpretations of Jesus' actions and words. Jesus does not respond in the typical manner we would think of as most would imagine Jesus as compassionate, eager to serve this woman in need. Instead, Jesus rebuffs her, calling her a "dog," which translates into what Anglo-Americans refer to as a female dog, a slur we use to demean others.² There is nothing to suggest though Jesus is overcoming xenophobia, is sexist, or discriminates based on socio-economic status and geographical location.³ There are no reasons given why Jesus says what he says to her.

Whatever the reason, Jesus is moved by her reply made back to him and tells her to go home for her daughter has been made well. It shows the powerful Lord attending to the needs of

¹ Lamar Williamson Jr., "Mark." *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 137.

² Warren Carter and Amy-Jill Levine, *The New Testament: Methods and Meanings* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013), 47.

³ Ibid. 46-47.

someone else.⁴ And we see how God wrestles with humanity and is attentive to our pleas, whoever we might be.

Application

In some circles, I have heard people get awfully nervous with this text. How could Jesus say what he said? Maybe Jesus was just playing pretend. Perhaps he wanted to test the disciples. Jesus never would have done or said what he did or have his mind changed by this woman.

Yet to not wrestle with this text I think negates the very point God wants to make about how we interact with the Lord. If anything, this story is God giving us the invitation to wrestle and ask questions about our relationship with God and to also name how God can handle anything we throw at God. Whether it be a penitent prayer request, an angry calling out of God's absence, or simply the questions we ask everyday of "Why Lord," we see how God is more than capable of taking whatever we lift up to the Lord of all creation.

Even for those of us who might be quiet or like to reflect on our own, there does come a time when sometimes the most helpful course of action is to verbalize what we are thinking or feeling. As the words pour out and we have a tangible conversation with God, we name the truths or frustrations as the Lord already knows what was sitting on our hearts and our minds. God is more than able to be a willing listener helping us to have everything come out of the system. What's even more surprising is we never know how God will respond, perhaps if not audibly with a sign from the Holy Spirit.

As a child I have a distinct memory of riding with my father on a trip we took to the city, a thirty-minute drive from the little hamlet we were living in at the time. During the trip, I remember my father beginning to talk to himself about some pastoral dilemma. I listened for a bit and then I asked my Dad if he was talking to me, my five year-old brain puzzled by why Dad's voice was low and sounding like he was in a conversation with himself. Daddy smiled and explained how sometimes he had to talk things aloud between himself and God to figure it all out.

Fast forward to now and I find myself doing the same thing. In my drive to teach at a college in a city, I sometimes fill my hour drive with a lecture from a podcast or the Great Courses app; other days I find soothing classical music or jazz tunes to let my mind dance. And then there are other days where I turn everything off and I just talk to God. I ask all the questions on my mind; or I try to figure out the dynamics of issues going on around me. In a sort of form, I find myself verbally wrestling with God. At times the resolution comes in the talking, and in other times I feel the Holy Spirit giving me peace for just releasing the things upon my heart and mind.

I hope all Christians have a place where they verbally wrestle with God. Some of us might even hopefully have a spiritual companion we can do so alongside, and for others of us we might need the drive or even the walk to ask God all the things. Just as we find with our Syrophenician woman, God might even speak to us perhaps in different ways we didn't expect. God can handle the questions and the dilemmas we throw at the Lord and God is more than willing to speak at certain times if we are willing to listen. Today's lesson reminds us of

⁴ Ibid., 49.

however we might think we feel or look in the site of the Lord, God will always be present. God has made all and is for all people. And God invites us to be honest and to pour out our weary souls to the one who will make us whole.

Do you carve out time to intentionally verbalize or talk to God? Why do you think it's just as important to praise God as ask God questions and wrestle with life? Who are the safe people who you can sometimes verbalize your struggles of faith alongside? Why is it important to wrestle with the Bible, asking big questions and coming with an open mind? How has God healed you after naming something on your heart and mind?

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